

Canal Plus

ABNER BENAİM'S NEW DOCUMENTARY is about the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989. What invasion of Panama? Indeed. As the director repeatedly points out, *Invasion* isn't about the event itself—it's about how people remember it. The interviews start in the enclosed space of a recording studio, then move out onto the streets, where Benaim asks people to help re-create scenes from the invasion, based on their own or their friends' recollections.

Benaim talks to everyone: he pays a homeless man to play dead in a body bag, interviews the man in charge of the locks in the Canal Zone, talks to crackheads and rich folks alike. Some people fought and killed, or tried to kill, American paratroopers. This was a lost cause, for Panama was home to massive U.S. military bases—the invasion force was already in place. Those who couldn't stand military dictator Manuel Noriega or his "Dignity Battalions" partied and enjoyed the show. Poor people ransacked stores; rich families invited American troops to dinner.

The sheer variety of Benaim's *Panameños* interviewees—in shape, size, skin tone, and perspective on the events of December 1989—married with the country's clear and precise Spanish makes his documentary a pleasure to watch, even when dealing with the indiscriminate bombing of impoverished neighborhoods or the disappearing of corpses and body parts by military "garbagemen."

The film's particular strategy of reenacting events initially seems likely to fall flat. But these are the people who were there, and their re-creations—in the streets of contemporary Panama—are chilling. Even more chilling is Benaim's brief conversation with some Panamanian teenagers, who have never heard of the invasion, and couldn't care less.

